BREAKING RULES
AND LOWERING BARRIERS

On January 11, 2015, Charlie Todd took a train ride on the New York City subway. He wasn’t wearing any pants. Charlie was not alone. In fact, he was joined by more than 4,000 other pantsless riders in New York City that day. They gathered in seven locations around the city, boarded 11 different subway lines, and headed toward a rendezvous at Union Station. They spaced themselves out across many subway cars, had minimal interaction with one another, and acted as normally as possible. The event was all part of the now-annual No Pants Subway Ride coordinated by Improv Everywhere, a self-described “prank collective that causes scenes of chaos and joy in public places,” which Charlie Todd founded in 2001.

Improv Everywhere has sponsored over 100 missions, some of which may be familiar because their videos have often gone viral. The No Pants event started in 2002 with just seven participants and grew larger each year, celebrating its fourteenth anniversary in 2015 with over 10,000 participants worldwide in 60 cities across 25 countries, including London, Tokyo, and Bangalore. In 2008, over 200 participants (“agents”) converged on Grand Central Station and simultaneously froze in place for five minutes, after which they resumed what they were doing as if nothing had happened. In 2009, they randomly picked a just-married couple departing the City Clerk’s Office and threw them a wedding reception complete with a formally attired wedding party, cake, a toast, gifts, and dancing.
In 2013, agents served as “seeing eye persons” for people who were texting and walking in New York City, cleaning a path while the person texting trailed behind, holding on to a leash. In 2014, 40 agents entered New York City’s Fifth Avenue Gap store and pretended to be mannequins until 911 was called and police escorted them out. (Videos for these and many other missions are available at ImprovEverywhere.com.)

The scenes that Improv Everywhere creates help reveal our taken-for-granted rules for behavior. In our daily lives we follow routines that are largely invisible to us, and we expect others to do likewise. When people do things differently, we tend to get uncomfortable. It disrupts our sense of order. One of the best parts of their videos is watching how people respond. Initial confusion and nervousness are often followed by smiles as people realize they are seeing a performance. We want and need the actions of others to be predictable, so we create both formal and informal rules to guide our behaviors. Such rules are an important component of culture.

As You READ

Why do humans create culture?
What does culture consist of?
How does culture both enable and constrain?

Culture mediates between individuals and the external world. While we experience the natural world through our senses—hearing, sight, touch, smell, and taste—we depend on culture to interpret those sensations. Our retinas may send visual images to our brains, but recognition of patterns is made possible through culture. For example, we might fail to see an image in an optical illusion until someone nudges us to “look at it this way.” Nothing about the physical image changed, but our perspective on it, with the help of others, has. We do not perceive nature directly; we perceive the world around us through the lens of culture.

Through interactions with others, we develop and share perceptions of what the world is like and how we should act within it. The shared culture that results provides us with a tool kit of similar habits, skills, and styles (Swidler 1986). For example, when someone says hello, we know how to respond. When we show up for the first day of class, we know where to sit or stand depending on whether or not we are the student or professor. Culture facilitates social interaction.

Over time, we take shared culture for granted. The ways we think, the rules we follow, the things we have created all seem natural to us. We pass along these expectations to others within the contexts of families, schools, places of worship, and workplaces. As a result, we know what to do, when to do it, and with whom.
Going GLOBAL

Is success in life determined by forces outside our control?

As the graph illustrates, perceptions about the degree to which we control our fates vary by country. In a survey of 44 nations, only Venezuelans (62 percent) were more likely than people in the United States to disagree. The global median was 38 percent.

Society

The structure of relationships within which culture is created and shared through regularized patterns of social interaction.

cultural universal

A common practice or belief shared by all societies.

In so doing, we create society. Society consists of the structure of relationships within which culture is created and shared through regularized patterns of social interaction. Society provides the taken-for-granted structure within which we interact. It both enables and constrains the culture we construct. In a given culture, some ways of thinking, acting, and making seem inevitable, whereas other ways may not even be conceivable. For example, the way our society organizes government determines our rights and responsibilities and the way we organize education shapes how and what we learn.

Because cultural preferences are constructed by different people in different times and places, culture varies across societies. People often confront this reality when they travel abroad and find their taken-for-granted ideas and actions to be out of place and inappropriate. Educational methods, marriage ceremonies, and religious doctrines vary significantly. In India, parents are accustomed to arranging marriages for their children, but in the United States, parents typically leave such choices up to their children. Lifelong residents of Cairo consider it natural to speak Arabic, whereas lifelong residents of Buenos Aires feel the same way about Spanish.

Creating Culture

Because we are not narrowly determined by our genes, human beings throughout history have demonstrated the innovative capacity to create amazing cultural artifacts. Examples include the cave paintings at Lascaux, France, poems by Langston Hughes, novels by Toni Morrison, and films such as Schindler’s List. We now take for granted what once seemed impossible, from air travel, to the cloning of cells, to organ transplants, to always-on wireless Internet access. We can peer into the outermost reaches of the universe or analyze our innermost feelings. In all these ways, our cultural creativity sets us apart as remarkably different from other species of the animal kingdom.

CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

Given that we have a certain amount of freedom to construct culture in a multitude of ways, one of the early sociological questions was whether there are any aspects of culture shared by all people. Some sociologists, such as Comte, sought to discover whether there are fundamental laws of society equivalent to the laws of nature. Such patterns were referred to as cultural universals—common practices and beliefs shared by all societies. Anthropologist George Murdock (1945) compared results from studies of hundreds of cultures and concluded that, although there are common denominators shared by all cultures, how cultures go about addressing each varies significantly. Included among his list of 70 categories were athletic sports, community organization, dancing, division of labor, folklore, funeral rites, housing, incest taboos, marriage, personal names, property rights, religious ritual, sexual restrictions, and trade. The degree of human variation we see in how we organize such activities suggests that we do not have universal laws determining human behavior that are the equivalent of the laws of nature in science.

The debate about the degree to which our behavior is determined harkens back to philosophical questions regarding nature versus...
In Guatemala, Tanzania, and around the world, material culture varies across time and place.

Did You Know?

Marc Platt, producer of the Broadway play *Wicked* and numerous movies, including *Legally Blonde, Rachel Getting Married, Drive, and Ricki and the Flash*, was a sociology major.

Photo: © AP Photo/Thomas Kienzle

primarily by the social and psychological influences of others around us (especially parents); human nature is malleable, and we become who we are in the contexts of the societies we create. Over time most researchers have realized that this either-or argument is inadequate or misleading, because the relationship between the two forces is more fluid, better represented by shades of gray.

Sociological research reveals significant cross-cultural and cross-time variation in how we think and act. For example, in the 19th century it was thought that, biologically speaking, women were not capable of success in college because their brains were too small and their reproductive organs made them too emotional. Over time we learned that such presuppositions are false—women now make up almost 60 percent of college graduates—but at one time these assertions were accepted as “natural” and therefore resistant to change. Similar biologically based claims have been used in the past to justify inequality (claims that were later revealed to be scientifically untrue), leading many sociologists to question biological explanations for human behavior (Lucal 2010). One of the lessons we learn about culture throughout human history is that variety and change are the norm.

More recently, researchers in both the natural sciences and sociology have sought a nuanced understanding of the relationship between biology and culture. In the scientific community there has been growing support for gene-culture coevolution, in which each shapes the other through the course of human development. From this perspective, how individuals turn out isn’t simply a matter of whether they inherited a set of “bad genes” or “good genes.” Instead, researchers argue that an interdependent relationship exists between genes and environment. How genes are expressed (whether or not they are triggered, in other words) can depend on our natural, social, and cultural contexts. From this perspective, genes are responsive to the social context and do not inevitably trigger predetermined responses.

**sociobiology** The systematic study of how biology affects human social behavior.
**innovation** The process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture through discovery or invention.

**discovery** The process of uncovering or revealing an existing aspect of reality.

**invention** The combination of existing cultural artifacts to create something new.

**DIFFUSION**

More and more cultural expressions and practices are crossing national borders and influencing the traditions and customs of the societies exposed to them. Sociologists at predetermined times (Rutter 2010; Rutter, Moffitt, and Caspi 2006; Shenk 2010). In pursuit of a more informed understanding of this interplay, the American Sociological Association established a new section called “Evolution, Biology, and Society” in 2005 (Machalek and Martin 2010).

**INNOVATION**

Humans have the freedom and ability to create new things. Whereas a robin’s nest in the year 2016 looks very much like one in 1916 or 1016 because robins act on a nest-building instinct, human abodes vary widely. We can live in a cave, a castle, a sod house, a pueblo, a high-rise apartment, a McMansion, or a dorm room. Such variation is possible because we are free to innovate. **Innovation**—the process of introducing a new idea or object to a culture—interests sociologists because it can have ripple effects across a society.

There are two main forms of innovation: discovery and invention. **Discovery** involves uncovering or revealing an existing aspect of reality. The identification of the DNA molecule and the sighting of a new moon of Saturn are both acts of discovery. A significant factor in the process of discovery is the sharing of newfound knowledge with others. By contrast, an **invention** combines existing cultural artifacts to create something new. The bow and arrow, the automobile, and the television are all examples of inventions, as are abstract concepts such as Protestantism and democracy.

**SOC THINK**

Taking into account the sociological imagination, to what extent do you think innovation is a matter of individual genius versus being in the right place at the right time?
Technology makes it possible for us to keep in touch with almost anyone anywhere, as these numbers showing the explosion in the number of wireless phone subscribers since 1985 demonstrate.

Source: CTIA 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>33.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>207.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>302.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>335.7 million</td>
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The emergence of Starbucks in China demonstrates the cultural impact of globalization. Starbucks’ expansion affects not only coffee consumption patterns but also the international trade in coffee beans, which are harvested mainly in developing countries. Our consumption-oriented culture supports a retail price of three to five dollars for a single cup of premium coffee. Even though coffee prices have reached all-time highs, millions of farmers around the world can barely eke out a living. Worldwide, the growing demand for coffee, tea, chocolate, fruit, and other natural resources is straining the environment, as poor farmers in developing countries clear more and more forestland to enlarge their fields (Herman 2010).

Diffusion often comes at a cost. In practice, globalization has led to the cultural domination of developing nations by more affluent nations. In these encounters, people in developed nations often pick and choose the cultural practices they find intriguing or exotic, whereas people in developing nations often lose their traditional values and begin to identify with the culture of the dominant nations. They may discard or neglect their native language and dress, attempting to imitate the icons of mass-market entertainment and fashion. In this way, Western popular culture represents a threat to native cultures. For example, Walt Disney’s critics have called his work “perhaps the primary example of America’s cultural imperialism, supplanting the myths of native cultures with his own” (Gabler 2006). So something is gained and something is lost through diffusion, and often it is the poorer societies that sacrifice more of their culture.

Elements of Culture

To better understand what culture consists of we can categorize it into three primary types: material, cognitive, and normative. Each type enables us to interact more effectively with the world around us. We will look at each in turn.

use the term diffusion to refer to the process by which some aspect of culture spreads from group to group or society to society. Historically, diffusion typically occurred through a variety of means, including exploration, war, military conquest, and missionary work. Today, societal boundaries that were once relatively closed owing to the constraints of transportation and communication have become more permeable, with cross-cultural exchange occurring more quickly. Through the mass media, the Internet, immigration, and tourism, we regularly confront the people, beliefs, practices, and artifacts of other cultures.

Cultural innovation has global consequences in today’s world. Starbucks, with its familiar green logo, was founded in Seattle, Washington, in 1971 but now has a global presence. Today it is possible to order a decaf latte in the heart of Beijing’s Forbidden City, just outside the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the former residence of Chinese emperors. The first Starbucks in mainland China opened in 1999 and by January 2015 there were 1,657 of them. The success of Starbucks in a country in which coffee drinking is still a novelty (where the average person drinks only five cups of coffee per year and tea is the preferred drink) has been striking. In fact, for many, drinking coffee has now become a status symbol of middle-class success (Christian 2009; Halper 2013; Loxcel Geomatics 2015).
MATERIAL CULTURE

Because we lack complex instincts that determine our behavior, we must establish a relationship to the natural world in order to survive. We do so by constructing material culture, our physical modification of the natural environment to suit our purposes. Material culture includes the clothes we wear, the books we read, the chairs we sit in, the carpets we walk on, the lights we use, the buildings we live in, the cars we drive, the roads we drive on, and so much more. When such objects become part of our lives, we often take them for granted, thinking of them as just natural. Take cell phones, for example. Back in 1985 there were only 340,213 total cell phone subscribers in the United States. By the end of 2013, that number exceeded 335 million (CTIA 2014). What was once a luxury item for elites has become something that many of us can’t imagine living without.

Material culture exists because we as human beings have the innovative capacity to modify our world. The most common term we use to refer to material culture is technology. Technology is a form of culture in which humans modify the natural environment to meet particular wants and needs. It includes not only high-tech items such as computers, cars, and cell phones, but low-tech items including spoons, paper, and chalk.

Technology enhances our human abilities, giving us powers we often associate with superheroes, including X-ray vision, healing powers, flight, and more. A pivotal moment in the development of such power was the invention of the steam engine during the Industrial Revolution. It provided us with historically unprecedented strength and stamina—the ability to lift and move extremely heavy objects and to do so over sustained periods of time. It made modern coal mining practical, provided manufacturing machinery with the power needed for early factories, and powered early tractors and locomotives, setting the stage for modern global mobility (Rosen 2010).

Did You Know

... The United States Patent and Trademark Office issued 287,831 patents in 2013 and has approved over 8 million since the United States began issuing patents in 1790.

Advances in technology, especially when it comes to the revolutions in communication and transportation, have linked more individuals in a global network than was ever possible in the past. Cell phones, for example, enable us to stay in touch with friends and family from almost anywhere. Planes, trains, and automobiles allow us to travel over long distances in almost no time at all, reducing the historic significance of geographic separation and isolation. And laptops and iPads allow us to bring the workplace with us wherever we go.

Sometimes technological change occurs faster than our capacity to interpret and understand the impact of such changes. Because it goes to the core of our perception of reality, nonmaterial culture, including our values, beliefs, and expectations, is often more resistant to change than is the material culture. Sociologist William F. Ogburn (1922) introduced the term cultural lag to refer to the period of adjustment when the nonmaterial culture is struggling to adapt to new conditions of the material culture. For example, the nine-month school calendar was designed with an agricultural economy in mind so that children would be home to help families in the fields during the summer month. Even though only a small percentage of jobs remain agricultural, most schools still adopt it. Or, another example, global climate change has become a pressing concern. Scientists overwhelmingly point to the role carbon...
dioxide plays, yet we find it difficult to make the kinds of lifestyle changes that might be called for, such as driving smaller cars, using more public transportation, or reducing consumption.

**Cognitive Culture**

The second component of culture, **cognitive culture**, consists of our mental and symbolic representations of reality. It is the part of culture that includes values, beliefs, knowledge, and all other representations constructed to make sense of the world around us. However, its most basic component, and perhaps the most important human cultural creation and the one upon which all others depend, is language.

**Language**

The building block of all communication and cooperation, **language** is a system of shared symbols; it includes speech, written characters, numerals, symbols, and nonverbal gestures and expressions. It provides the foundation of a common culture because it facilitates day-to-day exchanges with others, making collective action possible. According to the Ethnologue, a database of all known languages around the world, there are 7,106 living languages today. Of these, 1,519 (21 percent) are classified as “in trouble” and 915 (13 percent) are “dying.” There are 341 languages with fewer than 10 speakers, and 373 languages have become extinct since 1950 (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2015).

Language is fundamentally social in nature. There are no inherent meanings in the sounds we make when talking or in the written alphabet we use. Instead, words get their meaning from us. We come together to agree that certain sounds or shapes mean certain things, and then we act based on those shared meanings. What matters most is our shared perception rather than the actual sound or image we use. We could, for example, teach a dog the wrong meanings of commands (fetch means stay, roll over means shake, and so on). The dog would never know the difference, but we would laugh because its responses would clash with our expectations. In fact, when we start to learn a new language, we are at the mercy of those who teach us. We rely on their authority, and the only way to test our fluency is through interactions with other speakers. Because language is socially constructed, it allows change. We create new words and modify existing ones—especially in our modern global culture where innovation is never-ending. Dictionaries are regularly modified in an effort to try to keep up. In 2015, the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* added over 1,700 new words including photobomb, emoji, meme, twerk, jegging, and sriracha.

Some linguists, including amateurs, have seized on the socially constructed nature of language in hopes of creating whole new languages from scratch, with varying motivations (Okrent 2009). Some, inspired by the scientific revolution, were appalled by the inefficiencies and irregularities of existing languages. They invented new languages in the 17th and 18th centuries (such as Francis Lodwick’s *Common Writing* or John Wilkins’s *Philosophical Language*) in hopes of providing us with a logical system of communication in which the relationships between concepts were rational and everything fit together into a coherent whole. They didn’t want words to be arbitrary sounds we attach to things, hoping instead to map the essence of things through language. Even though they succeeded in creating coherent systems, the languages they created were difficult to use and failed to attract widespread acceptance.

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**Personal Sociology**

I was reminded of our ability to create new words while on a family hiking trip in Oregon. Eleanor, who was four at the time, was riding on my shoulders along the trail while her sister, Emily, and my wife, Lori, were falling behind. Eleanor turned and yelled as loud as she could, “Stop chickenjagging!” We knew immediately what she meant and have used this word ever since. Anyone can create words, but they become meaningful only when they are shared with others. For Eleanor’s new word to become part of the common language, the chickenjagging network must extend beyond our immediate family into the wider world. Have you ever done something similar with friends or family?
During the 20th century, other language inventors, driven in part by a desire to come to terms with globalization and increased contact across cultures, combined various aspects of existing languages. Their goal was to create a universally accepted language that would transcend national and ethnic differences. Rather than focus on purity of representation, such inventors emphasized pragmatic communication. The most successful language of this type was Esperanto, which continues to be used today. It was originally created by Ludwik Zamenhof in 1887 and literally means “one who hopes.” It was Zamenhof’s hope that his hybrid language would not only facilitate international commerce and communication but also contribute to world peace by reducing the cultural differences that separate us.

In spite of the relative success of Esperanto, none of these invented languages has achieved widespread adoption. Part of what such attempts seem to miss is that language is a community endeavor built up over generations of shared experiences that lead to common understandings of how the world works. Though it is technically possible to create a language from scratch, doing so underscores the importance that such experiences have in shaping who we are. As linguist Arika Okrent put it in her history of invented languages, “[Languages] are the repositories of our very identities. . . . [Esperanto, along with other invented languages,] asks us to turn away from what makes our languages personal and unique and choose one that is generic and universal. It asks us to give up what distinguishes us from the rest of the world for something that makes everyone in the world the same” (Okrent 2009:112). To the extent that Esperanto has succeeded, it has done so by creating a community of shared participants who are committed to keeping the language alive.

A more recent wave of constructed languages comes mostly from hobbyists, known as “conlangers,” who view the construction of a complete, functioning language as a challenge. The inspiration for these attempts often traces back to J. R. R. Tolkien’s creation of Elvish for the Lord of the Rings book trilogy. Tolkien was a philologist—one who studies the history, structure, and criticism of language—and he used this knowledge to ensure that his constructed languages followed common linguistic patterns and practices. Due to the level of technical detail required, many recent conlangers are often similarly trained, such as Marc Okrand who created Klingon for the Star Trek movie franchise (see www.kli.org) and Paul Frommer who created the Na’vi language used in the film Avatar (see www.LearnNavi.org).

Even though it is possible to construct languages for fun, throughout human history the most basic purpose of language has been to enable us to make sense of the world around us in communication with others. Once we internalize and use a language, its structure and vocabulary shapes our perception of reality and therefore also our actions. This insight is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (after linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf) or the linguistic relativity hypothesis. It implies that our understanding of reality is not strictly determined by nature, but more so by the tools available to us in the languages we use.

In a literal sense, language may color how we see the world. Anthropologist Brent Berlin and linguist Paul Kay (1991) noted that humans possess the physical ability to make millions of color distinctions, yet languages differ in the number of colors they recognize. For example, the English language distinguishes between yellow and orange, but some other languages do not. In the Dugum Dani language of New Guinea’s West Highlands, there are only two basic color terms—modla for “white” and mil for “black.” (Roberson, Davies, and Davidoff 2000; Wierzbicka 2008).
In Japan, what people in the United States would call a green light is often called a blue light, even though it is the same color there as it is here. This practice derives from an earlier time in Japan when there was only one word, ao (青), to describe both green and blue (Backhaus 2013). The more recent practice of making a clear distinction between the two colors in Japan has been tied to the importation of crayons into Japan starting in 1917, which distinguished between midori (緑) for green and ao for blue. The Allied occupation of Japan after World War II reinforced this distinction in educational materials distributed throughout the country (Bhatia 2012). And yet remnants of the earlier linguistic pattern remain in the form not only of “blue” traffic lights, but also of “blue” vegetables, “blue” apples, and “blue” leaves.

Feminists have noted that gender-related language can reinforce the stereotype that some jobs are more appropriate for men than women. Each time we use a term such as mailman, policeman, or fireman, we are implying (especially to young children) that these occupations can be filled only by males. Yet many women work as letter carriers, police officers, and firefighters—a fact that is being increasingly recognized and legitimized through the use of such non sexist language (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; McConnell-Ginet 2011).

Linguist Suzette Haden Elgin went so far as to invent a new language that gives voice to women’s experience (Elgin 1984). She argued that “existing human languages are inadequate to express the perceptions of women,” which leads to inadequate perception of critical issues in the lives of women (Elgin 1988). Drawing on her expertise in the Navajo language (Diné bizaad), she created Láadan as a test of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. She argued that using Láadan would open up new dimensions of reality that are not easily accessible using such languages as English. Láadan lessons for beginners are available at www.LáadanLanguage.org.

Language can also transmit stereotypes related to race. Look up the meanings of the adjective black in dictionaries published in the United States, and you will find “dismal, gloomy or forbidding, destitute of moral light or goodness, atrocious, evil, threatening, clouded with anger.” By contrast, dictionaries list “pure” and “innocent” among the meanings of the adjective white. Through such patterns of language, our culture reinforces positive associations with the term (and skin color) white and negative associations with black. Is it surprising, then, that a list meant to prevent people from working in a profession is called a “blacklist,” and a fib that we think of as somewhat acceptable is called a “white lie”? Such examples demonstrate that language can shape how we see, taste, smell, feel, and hear (Henderson 2003; Moore 1976; Reitman 2006).

Of course, we communicate using more than just words. If you do not like the way a meeting is going, you might suddenly sit back, fold your arms, and turn down the corners of your mouth. When you see a friend in tears, you may give her a quick hug. After winning a big game, you may high-five your teammates. These are all examples of nonverbal communication—the use of gestures, facial expressions, and other visual images to communicate. We are not born with these expressions. We learn them, just as we learn other forms of language, from people who share our culture. We learn how to show—and to recognize—happiness, sadness, pleasure, shame, distress, and other emotional states (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd 2010).

Like other forms of language, nonverbal communication is not the same in all cultures. For example, people from various cultures differ in the degree to which they touch others during the course of normal social interactions. Even experienced travelers are sometimes caught off guard by these differences. In Saudi Arabia a middle-aged man may want to hold hands with a male partner after closing a business deal. The gesture, which would surprise most Americans, is considered a compliment in that culture. The meaning of hand signals is another form of nonverbal communication that can differ from one culture to the next. For instance, in both Australia and Iraq the thumbs-up sign is considered rude (Koerner 2003; Lefevre 2011).

Values. In addition to creating a shared language as part of our cognitive culture, we also jointly agree that some principles are at the core of who we are and what we believe. Values are the collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable, and proper—or bad, undesirable, and improper—in a culture. They are typically expressed as general principles that then shape what we see as appropriate actions. Examples include family, love, opportunity, community, and freedom. Even individualism...
represents a collective value. As American essayist Richard Rodriguez points out, “American individualism is a communally derived value, not truly an expression of individuality. The teenager persists in rebelling against her parents, against tradition or custom, because she is shielded . . . by American culture from the knowledge that she inherited her rebellion from dead ancestors and living parents” (2002:130). Of course, all members of a society do not uniformly agree on its values. Angry political debates and billboards promoting conflicting causes tell us that much.

The values of a culture may change, but most remain relatively stable during any one person’s lifetime. Socially shared, intensely felt values are a fundamental part of our lives in the United States. Sociologist Robin Williams (1970) has offered a list of U.S. basic values. These include freedom, equality, democracy, morality, conformity, progress, humanitarianism, and material comfort. Obviously, not all 320 million people in the United States agree on all these values, but such a list serves as a starting point in defining America’s national character.

Each year more than 200,000 first-year college students at approximately 270 of the nation’s four-year colleges fill out a questionnaire asking them which values are most important to them. Because of its coverage, content, and scope, this survey provides a kind of barometer of the nation’s values. The top value of the first-year class of 1966, the year the survey was first conducted, was “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” with 80 percent of the new students identifying it as either essential or very important. By contrast, only 44 percent chose “being very well-off financially.” Since that time, the relative position of these two values has flipped (see graph). Among the first-year class

In Arab cultures, men sometimes hold hands as a sign of affection and friendship. Photo: © dbimages/Alamy.

**SOC THINK**

Consider Williams’s list of basic values. Do you think most people value these things? How might some values, such as freedom and conformity, conflict? How do we resolve such conflicts?
of 2013, for example, a record high 82 percent identified “being very well-off financially” as a significant value compared to 44.8 percent who selected “developing a meaningful philosophy” (Eagan et al. 2013).

Researchers have also studied other family and community values among first-year students. The second-highest rated value identified by the 2013 class was “raising a family,” at 73.3 percent. This value has remained at approximately the same level for nearly 50 years (Eagan et al. 2013). Students in 2013 were also committed to “helping others who were in difficulty” (72 percent), although only 30 percent selected “participating in a community action program” as either essential or very important. The proportion that identified “helping to promote racial understanding” rose over the previous year to 35.7 percent. As these numbers demonstrate, a nation’s values are not necessarily set in stone.

Because it challenges honesty as a shared value, cheating is a significant concern on college campuses. Professors who take advantage of computerized services that can identify plagiarism, such as the search engine Google or TurnItIn.com, have found that many of the papers their students hand in are plagiarized, in whole or in part. When high school students were asked about academic honesty, 32 percent admitted to copying an Internet document for a classroom assignment, 51 percent said they’d cheated during a test at school, and 74 percent had copied someone’s homework, all within the past year. At the same time, 86 percent agreed that “it’s not worth it to lie or cheat because it hurts your character” (Josephson Institute of Ethics 2012).

Perhaps cheating has become a normal part of student culture even if it is at odds with dominant school values.

Sometimes values shift in response to historic events. Americans have always valued their right to privacy and resented government intrusions into their personal lives. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, many citizens called for greater protection against the threat of terrorism. In response, the federal government broadened its surveillance powers and increased its ability to monitor people’s behavior without court approval. In 2001, shortly after the attacks, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act, which empowers the FBI to access individuals’ medical, library, student, and phone records without informing them or obtaining a search warrant.

**NORMATIVE CULTURE**

Whereas cognitive culture highlights what we think or believe, normative culture, the third element of culture, focuses on how we act. Normative culture consists of the ways we establish, abide by, and enforce principles of conduct. In our everyday lives, we typically abide by norms—the established standards of behavior maintained by a society—both big and small, from “Thou shalt not kill” to “Chew with your mouth closed.” Most of the time, we do so without thinking much about it.

For a norm to become significant, it must be widely shared and understood. For example, in movie theaters in the United States, we typically expect that people will be quiet while the film is shown. Of course, context matters, and the application of this norm can vary, depending on the particular film and type of audience. People who are viewing a serious artistic film will be more likely to insist on the norm of silence than those who are watching a slapstick comedy or a horror movie.

**Types of Norms** Sociologists distinguish between norms in two ways. First, norms are classified by their relative importance to society. When presented this way, they are known as folkways and mores. Folkways are norms governing everyday behavior. They play an important role in providing general guidelines for how to act within a culture. Such norms are less rigid in their application, and their violation raises comparatively little concern. Mores (pronounced “MOR-ays”) are norms deemed highly necessary to the welfare
of a society, often because they embody core values. Each society demands obedience to its mores; violation can lead to severe penalties. Thus, the United States has strong mores against murder, treason, and child abuse, which have been institutionalized into formal norms.

Clothing provides an example of the difference between the two. For example, fashion is a folkway, and there is wide latitude in what we might wear. But what about not wearing any clothes in public? For most of us, most of the time (except perhaps on No Pants Subway Ride days) that would be crossing the line into the territory of mores, and we might expect a strong and swift response if we did so.

Norms are also classified as either formal or informal. **Formal norms** generally have been written down and specify strict punishments for violators. In the United States we often formalize norms into laws, which are very precise in defining proper and improper behavior. Sociologist Donald Black (1995) defined law as “governmental social control” ; that is, **laws** are formal norms enforced by the state. But laws are just one example of formal norms. The requirements for a college major and the rules of a card game are also considered formal norms.

By contrast, **informal norms** are generally understood but not precisely recorded. We follow largely unspoken rules for all kinds of everyday interactions, such as how to ride on an elevator, how to pass someone on a sidewalk, and how to behave in a college classroom. Knowledge of such norms is often taken for granted.

**SOC THINK**
Improv Everywhere’s No Pants Subway Ride calls people to do something outside their comfort zone. What factors might influence someone’s decision to participate? What would it take to get you to participate?

In many societies around the world, norms reinforce patterns of male dominance. For example, various folkways reveal men’s hierarchical position above women within the traditional Buddhist areas of Southeast Asia. In the sleeping cars of trains, women do not sleep in upper berths, above men. Hospitals that house men on the first floor do not place female patients on the second floor. Even on clotheslines, folkways in Southeast Asia dictate male dominance: women’s attire is hung lower than that of men (Bulle 1987).

**Break-a-Norm Day**

- **Wearing formal clothes in an informal setting**
- **Eating with the wrong utensil or none at all**
- **Responding to friends or family the same as to a boss or teacher**
- **Having long gaps in speech when talking with someone**
- **Standing just a little too close to or far from someone when talking with him or her**
- **Facing the back of an elevator instead of getting in and turning around**

**Breaking Norms**

Although norms provide us with guidelines on how to act, we can choose not to abide by them. Sometimes we violate the mainstream norms because we are actually following alternative norms from a subgroup within society. Teenage drinkers are often conforming to the standards of their peer group when they violate norms that condemn underage drinking. Similarly, business executives who use shady accounting techniques may be responding to a corporate culture that demands the maximization of profits at any cost, including the deception of investors and government regulatory agencies.

Norms are violated in some instances because one norm conflicts with another. For example, suppose you live in an apartment building and one night hear the screams of the woman next door, who is being beaten by her husband. If you decide to intervene by knocking on their door or calling
Informal norms are often unspoken and taken for granted, yet we rely on learned principles to decide how we (and we hope others) should proceed, as this cartoon humorously demonstrates.

the police, you are violating the norm of minding your own business while at the same time following the norm of assisting a victim of domestic violence.

Even if norms do not conflict, there are exceptions to any norm. The same action, under different circumstances, can cause one to be viewed as either a hero or a villain. For instance, secretly taping telephone conversations is normally considered not just intrusive but illegal. However, it can be done with a court order to obtain valid evidence for a criminal trial. We would heap praise

on a government agent who used such methods to convict an organized crime figure. In our culture we tolerate killing another human being in self-defense, and we actually reward killing in warfare, as was evident in the celebrations that followed the death of Osama bin Laden.

Acceptance of norms is subject to change as the political, economic, and social conditions of a culture are transformed. Until the 1960s, for example, formal norms throughout much of the United States prohibited the marriage of people from different racial groups. Over the past half century, however, such legal prohibitions have been cast aside. The process of change can be seen today in the increasing acceptance of single parents and the growing support for the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples.

When circumstances require the sudden violation of long-standing cultural norms, the change can upset an entire population. In Iraq, where Muslim custom strictly forbids touching by strangers for men and especially for women, the war that began in 2003 has brought numerous daily violations of the norm. Outside mosques, government offices, and other facilities likely to be targeted by terrorists, visitors must now be patted down and have their bags searched by Iraqi security forces. To reduce the discomfort caused by the procedure, women are searched by female guards and men by male guards. Despite that concession, and the fact that many Iraqis admit to or even insist on the need for such measures, people still wince at the invasion of their personal privacy. In reaction to the searches, Iraqi women have begun to limit the contents of the bags they carry or simply to leave them at home (Rubin 2003).

Sanctions When norms are violated, we can usually expect a response designed to bring our behavior back into line. If a basketball coach sends a sixth player into the game, we count on the referee to call a foul. If a job seeker shows up for a formal interview in shorts and a T-shirt, we predict that no job offer will follow. If we park without putting money into the meter, we should expect a ticket. In each of these cases, some form of negative repercussion results from our failure to abide by expected norms.
Sanctions are penalties and rewards for conduct concerning a social norm. They include both negative and positive responses to behavior; their purpose is to influence future behavior. Adhering to norms can lead to positive sanctions such as a pay raise, a medal, a word of gratitude, or a pat on the back. Negative sanctions might include fines, threats, imprisonment, and stares of contempt. In this way sanctions work to enforce the order that the norms represent. Most of the time we do not even need others to sanction our acts. Having internalized society’s norms, we police ourselves, using such internal motivations as guilt or self-satisfaction to regulate our own behavior.

As we saw with the No Pants Subway Ride, norms provide order, but norms change, and change can result in confusion. As social scientist Gustave Le Bon said in 1895, “Civilization is impossible without traditions, and progress impossible without the destruction of those traditions. The difficulty, and it is an immense difficulty, is to find a proper equilibrium between stability and variability.” In a world of norms, we constantly face this tension: to obey or not to obey.

**Cultural Variation**

Together the elements of culture provide us with social coherence and order. Culture clarifies for us what we think is good and bad, and right and wrong, giving us a sense of direction. That is not to say, however, that there is universal agreement on values and norms or that culture works on behalf of all for the greater good. Culture helps unify and provide meaning, but it also serves the interests of some individuals and groups to the detriment of others. As such, in addition to analyzing ways in which norms and values unite us, sociologists seek out and study cultural variation within society and investigate how culture can be used to secure and enhance power.

**DOMINANT IDEOLOGY**

One of the ways culture can function to maintain the privileges of certain groups is through the establishment of a dominant ideology—the set of cultural beliefs and practices that legitimate existing powerful social, economic, and political interests. The dominant ideology helps explain and justify who gets what and why in a way that supports and maintains the status quo. Dominant ideas can even squelch alternative expressions of what might be, casting such alternatives as threats to the existing order. Karl Marx argued that the dominant ideas in society help maintain the interests of the ruling class. This idea was picked up and developed by sociologists Georg Lukács (1923) and Antonio Gramsci (1929), who argued that the dominant ideology can be used as an instrument of power.

**ASPECTS OF CULTURAL VARIATION**

To more fully understand cultural variation, sociologists pay particular attention to differences that exist both within and between societies. Inuit tribes in northern Canada, clad in furs and dieting on whale blubber, have little in common with farmers in Southeast Asia, who dress for the heat and subsist mainly on the rice they grow in their paddies. Cultures adapt to meet specific sets of circumstances, such as climate, level of technology, population, and geography. This adaptation to different conditions shows up in differences in all elements of culture, including language, values, norms, and sanctions. Thus, despite the presence
of cultural universals such as courtship and religion, great diversity exists among the world’s many cultures. Moreover, even within a single nation, certain segments of the populace develop cultural patterns that differ from the patterns of the dominant society. Cultural variation, as described by sociologists, takes a number of forms.

**Subcultures** Rodeo riders, residents of a retirement community, workers on an offshore oil rig—all are examples of what sociologists refer to as subcultures. A subculture is a segment of society that shares a distinctive pattern of mores, folkways, and values that differs from the pattern of the larger society. In a sense, a subculture can be thought of as a culture existing within a larger, dominant culture. The existence of many subcultures is characteristic of complex societies such as the United States.

Members of a subculture participate in the dominant culture while engaging in unique and distinctive forms of behavior. Frequently, a subculture will develop its own slang, known as argot—specialized language that distinguishes it from the wider society. Such argot allows insiders—the members of the subculture—to understand words with special meanings and establishes patterns of communication that outsiders cannot understand. In so doing, it clarifies the boundary between “us” and “them” and reinforces a shared identity. We see something like this in the taken-for-granted words and acronyms in the instant-messaging and text-messaging world. There, abbreviations come fast and furious, from the well known, such as *lol* (laughing out loud), *brb* (be right back), and *g2g* (got to go), to the more obscure, such as *1337* (meaning “elite” and referring to symbolic language or “leet-speak”) or *pwned* (leet term meaning “defeated”).

In India a new subculture has developed among employees at the international call centers established by multinational corporations. To serve customers in the United States and Europe, the young men and women who work there must be fluent speakers of English. But the corporations that employ them demand more than proficiency in a foreign language; they expect their Indian employees to adopt Western values and work habits, including the grueling pace that U.S. workers take for granted. In return, the corporations offer perks such as Western-style dinners and dances and coveted consumer goods. Ironically, they allow employees to take the day off only on such American...
Subculture Slang

Anime and Manga Fans
- chibi eyes: the characteristic, big childlike eyes used in anime
- majoko: a girl anime character with magical powers who must save the world

Con Artists & Scammers
- grifter: a person who steals through deception
- phishing: seeking personal information by sending out emails that appear to be from legitimate companies

Graffiti Writers
- bite: to copy another graffiti writer’s work
- burner: a stylistically impressive, brilliantly colored piece of graffiti, usually written in a complex pattern of interlocking letters and other visual elements
- toy: an inexperienced or unskilled graffiti writer
- kill: to saturate an area with one’s graffiti

Bikers (Motorcyclists)
- brain bucket: a helmet
- ink slinger: a tattoo artist
- pucker factor: the degree of panic felt during a near-accident
- yard shark: a dog that races out to attack passing motorcyclists

Skateboarders
- deck: a skateboard platform
- face plant: a face-first crash
- sketchy: in reference to a trick, poorly done

Subcultures often produce their own unique jargon. The words may be appropriate in those subcultures, but they have the effect of drawing a line between insiders and the rest of us.

Source: Reid 2006. Photo: © RubberBall Productions RF

Countercultures
Sometimes a subculture can develop that seeks to set itself up as an alternative to the dominant culture. When a subculture conspicuously and deliberately opposes certain aspects of the larger culture, it is known as a counterculture. Countercultures typically thrive among the young, who have the least investment in the existing culture.

The 1960s, now often characterized by the phrase “sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll,” provide a classic case of an extensive counterculture. Largely composed of young people, members of this counterculture were turned off by a society they believed was too materialistic and technological. It included many political radicals and “hippies” who had “dropped out” of mainstream social institutions, but its membership was extensive and diverse. The young people expressed in their writings, speeches, and songs their visions, hopes, and dreams for a new society. As was reflected in the 1966 survey of first-year college students, these young women and men rejected the pressure to accumulate more expensive cars, larger homes, and an endless array of material goods. Instead, they expressed a desire to live in a culture based on more humanistic values, such as sharing, love, and coexistence with the environment. As a political force, they worked for peace—opposing U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam and encouraging draft resistance—as well as racial and gender equality (T. Anderson 2007; Gitlin 1993).

In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, people around the United States learned of the existence of terrorist groups operating as a counterculture within their own country. Many nations have had to deal with internal counterculture groups—often rooted in long-standing national, ethnic, or political differences—whose members strongly disagree with the values and norms of the dominant culture. In most cases this does not result in violence, but in some cases, as in Northern Ireland and Israel, groups have used attacks, including suicide bombings, to make a statement, both symbolic and real, seeking to bring attention to their situation and an end to their repression (Juergensmeyer 2003). In Northern Ireland, Israel, the Palestinian territory, and other parts of the world, many generations have lived in such circumstances. But terrorist cells are not necessarily fueled only by outsiders. Frequently, people become disenchanted with the policies of their own country, and a few take very violent steps (Juergensmeyer 2003).

Culture Shock
Today we are more and more likely to come into contact with and even immerse ourselves in cultures unlike our own. For example, it has become increasingly common for students to study abroad. Though they may well have predeparture orientation
sessions, when they get in-country, they often have a difficult time adjusting because so many of the little things that they took for granted, things they barely noticed before, no longer apply. Anyone who feels disoriented, uncertain, out of place, or even fearful when they encounter unfamiliar cultural practices may be experiencing culture shock. For example, a resident of the United States who visits certain areas in Cambodia and wants meat for dinner may be stunned to learn that a local specialty is rat meat. Similarly, someone from a strict Islamic culture may be shocked upon first seeing the comparatively provocative dress styles and open displays of affection that are common in the United States and other Western cultures.

Interestingly, after students who study abroad return home, they may experience a kind of reverse culture shock. Their time away has changed them, often in ways they were unaware of, and they find that they cannot so easily slip back into the old routines that those who remained at home expect of them. Culture shock reveals to us both the power and the taken-for-granted nature of culture. The rules we follow are so ingrained that we barely notice that we were following them until they are no longer there to provide the structure and order we assume as a given.

All of us, to some extent, take for granted the cultural practices of our society. As a result, it can be surprising and even disturbing to realize that other cultures do not follow our way of life. The fact is, customs that seem strange to us are considered normal and proper in other cultures, which may view our own mores and folkways as odd.

ATTITUDES TOWARD CULTURAL VARIATION

Ethnocentrism Living in the modern world, especially as a result of the revolutions in transportation and communication, makes it far more likely that we will encounter people from a whole range of cultural backgrounds than we were in the past. As a result, we are also more likely to struggle with what we think about the beliefs, values, and practices of others. When we hear people talking about “our” culture versus “their” culture, we are often confronted with statements that reflect the attitude that “our” culture is best. Terms such as underdeveloped, backward, and primitive may be used to refer to other societies. What “we” believe is a religion; what “they” believe is superstition and mythology.

It is tempting to evaluate the practices of other cultures on the basis of our own perspectives. Sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906) coined the term ethnocentrism to refer to the tendency to assume that one’s own culture and way of life represent what’s normal or are superior to all others. The ethnocentric person sees his or her own group as the center or defining point of culture and views all other cultures as deviations from what is “normal.” Thus, Westerners who see cattle as a

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culture shock  The feelings of disorientation, uncertainty, and even fear that people experience when they encounter unfamiliar cultural practices.

ethnocentrism  The tendency to assume that one’s own culture and way of life represent what’s normal or are superior to all others.
Sociology is a verb

Break a Norm

Choose some minor norm of face-to-face interaction (rather than disrupting a group) and violate it. Avoid anything that would harm another person, violate policies, or break the law. Be sure to give the impression that what you are doing is perfectly normal, and record how others respond to you. In what ways do they seek to make sense of your behavior or to restore order? How did breaking the norm affect you? What lessons did you learn about our everyday actions?

You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird

Cultural relativism means viewing people’s behavior from the perspective of their own culture. It places a priority on understanding other cultures, rather than dismissing them as “strange” or “exotic.” Unlike ethnocentrist(s), cultural relativists seek to employ the kind of value neutrality that Max Weber saw as so important.

Cultural relativism stresses that different social contexts give rise to different norms and values. Thus, we must examine practices such as polygamy, bullfighting, and monarchy within the particular contexts of the cultures in which they are found. Cultural relativism is not the same as moral relativism, which implies that no ultimate normative standards exist. Sociologists do not have to abandon their own morals and unquestionably accept every cultural variation. But cultural relativism does require a serious and unbiased effort to evaluate norms, values, and customs in light of their distinctive culture.

Practicing the sociological imagination calls for us to be more fully aware of the culture we as humans have created for ourselves and to be better attuned to the varieties of culture other people have established for themselves. Culture shapes our everyday behaviors all the time, and we select from the tools it provides. For the most part, we are not aware of the degree to which we are immersed in a world of our own making. Whether that includes the capacity to read a book, make a meal, or hug a stranger on the street, it is through culture that we establish our relationship to the external world and with one another.
I. Why do humans create culture?
   • Humans lack the complex instincts present in other animals, and as such they must construct a relationship to nature and with each other. We do this through the construction of shared culture.

II. What does culture consist of?
   • There are three primary elements of culture. Material culture consists of our modification of the physical environment. Cognitive culture is the thinking part of culture, including language, values, beliefs, and knowledge. Normative culture provides rules for behavior.

III. How does culture both enable and constrain?
   • Although culture provides us with the knowledge, rules, and artifacts we need to survive, it also limits our options. Words enable us to see, and tools enable us to make things, but both are designed for particular purposes and shield us from alternative possibilities. Further, with ethnocentrism, we cut ourselves off from new possibilities from different cultures.
SOCVIEWS on Culture

**Functionalist View**
- Sharing a culture helps define the society to which one belongs, establishing social order.
- Society preserves its culture by transmitting shared language, norms, and values from one generation to the next, thus providing social stability.
- The interests of subgroups within a culture are served by formation of subcultures.

**Conflict View**
- While a common culture helps unify a society, it also privileges some to the detriment of others.
- The dominant ideology reinforces the power of the ruling class.
- The existence of subcultures reflects unequal social arrangements, as brought to light by the civil rights and feminist movements.
- Language in a culture can be a source of conflict, as in the case of sexist language or language that transmits racial stereotypes.

**Interactionist View**
- Without social interaction, people would not be able to construct their culture or transmit it to others. In turn, having a common culture simplifies everyday transactions.
- Cultural diffusion is enhanced by interactions involved in immigration, tourism, the Internet, and the mass media.
- Both a culture’s language and nonverbal communication facilitate day-to-day exchanges between people.

**Preservation, Facilitation, Communication**

Key Concepts

**Conflict View**
- Privilege, dominance, inequality

**Functionalist View**
- Preservation, facilitation, communication

**Interactionist View**
- Social construction, nonverbal communication

MAKE THE CONNECTION

After reviewing the chapter, answer the following questions:

1. How would each of the three perspectives describe the lessons learned from the No Pants Subway Ride?
2. How would each perspective explain the existence of ethnocentrism?
3. How would each perspective approach the role that dominant ideology performs in a culture?
4. How would you use the perspectives to describe one of the subcultures at your school?
Pop Quiz

1. _____ consists of everything humans create in establishing our relationships to nature and with each other.
   a. Innovation
   b. Society
   c. Ethnocentrism
   d. Culture

2. People’s need for food, shelter, and clothing is an example of what George Murdock referred to as
   a. norms.
   b. folkways.
   c. cultural universals.
   d. cultural practices.

3. What is an invention?
   a. introducing a new idea or object to a culture
   b. combining existing cultural artifacts to create something new
   c. making known or sharing the existence of an aspect of reality
   d. the physical or technological aspects of our daily lives

4. What term do sociologists use to refer to the process by which a cultural item spreads from group to group or society to society?
   a. diffusion
   b. globalization
   c. innovation
   d. cultural relativism

5. Which of the following statements is true according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?
   a. Language simply describes reality.
   b. Language legitimates existing social, economic, and political interests.
   c. Language shapes our perception of reality.
   d. Language formation is constrained by cultural universals.

6. What do norms provide for us that we need?
   a. shared beliefs that unite us as one
   b. established standards of behavior
   c. a system of shared symbols enabling us to communicate with each other
   d. justification of existing inequality through shared beliefs and practices

7. What type of norms is deemed highly necessary to the welfare of a society, often because these norms embody the most cherished principles of a people?
   a. formal norms
   b. informal norms
   c. mores
   d. folkways

8. Which of the following terms describes the set of cultural beliefs and practices that help maintain powerful social, economic, and political interests?
   a. mores
   b. dominant ideology
   c. consensus
   d. values

9. Terrorist groups are examples of
   a. cultural universals.
   b. subcultures.
   c. countercultures.
   d. dominant ideologies.

10. What is the term used when one seeks to understand another culture from its perspective, rather than dismissing it as “strange” or “exotic”?
    a. ethnocentrism
    b. culture shock
    c. cultural relativism
    d. cultural value